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Cordery et al.

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[54] NETWORK OPEN METERING SYSTEM

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[*] Notice: This patent is subject to a terminal disclaimer.

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[22] Filed: **Dec. 19, 1995**

[51] **Int. Cl.**[7] **G07B 17/00**; H04L 9/00

[52] **U.S. Cl.** **705/60**; 380/51; 705/410; 705/62

[58] **Field of Search** 380/25, 49, 51; 395/113, 117; 705/41, 400, 401, 402, 60, 61, 62, 408, 410

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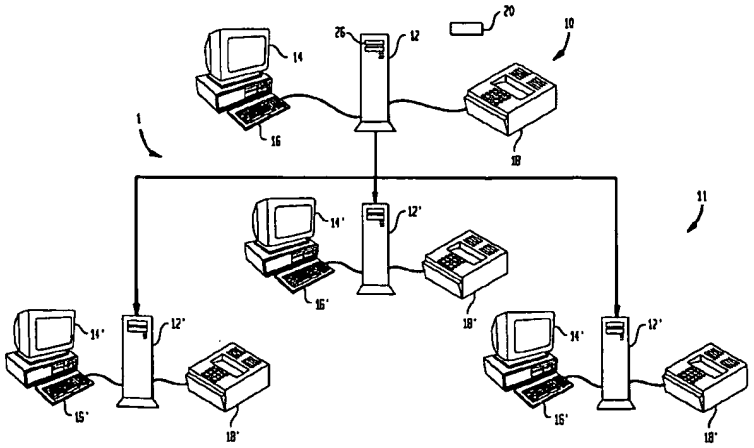
Primary Examiner—Pinchus M. Laufer

Attorney, Agent, or Firm—Charles R. Malandra, Jr.; Michael E. Melton

[57] **ABSTRACT**

A transaction evidencing system includes a plurality of computer systems operatively configured to form a network with one of the computer systems functioning as a server and the remaining computer systems functioning as clients. Each of the computer systems includes a processor, memory and storage media. At least some of the storage means includes non-metering application programs that are selectively run on the client computer systems. An unsecured printer is operatively coupled to at least one of the computer systems for printing in accordance with the non-metering application programs. A portable vault card, which is removably coupled to the server computer system, includes digital token generation and transaction accounting processing. The client computer systems issue requests for digital tokens to the server computer system in response to requests for indicia from the non-metering application programs. The requests for digital tokens include predetermined information required by the token generation processing. The server computer system communicates with the vault card when the vault card is coupled to the server computer system, sending the requests for digital tokens to the vault card and receiving from the vault card the generated digital tokens. The server computer system sends each digital token to the client computer system that requested the digital token. The requesting client computer system generates an indicia bitmap from the digital token. The server computer system receives from the vault a transaction record that includes the digital token and the predetermined information and stores the transaction record in its storage media.

15 Claims, 8 Drawing Sheets



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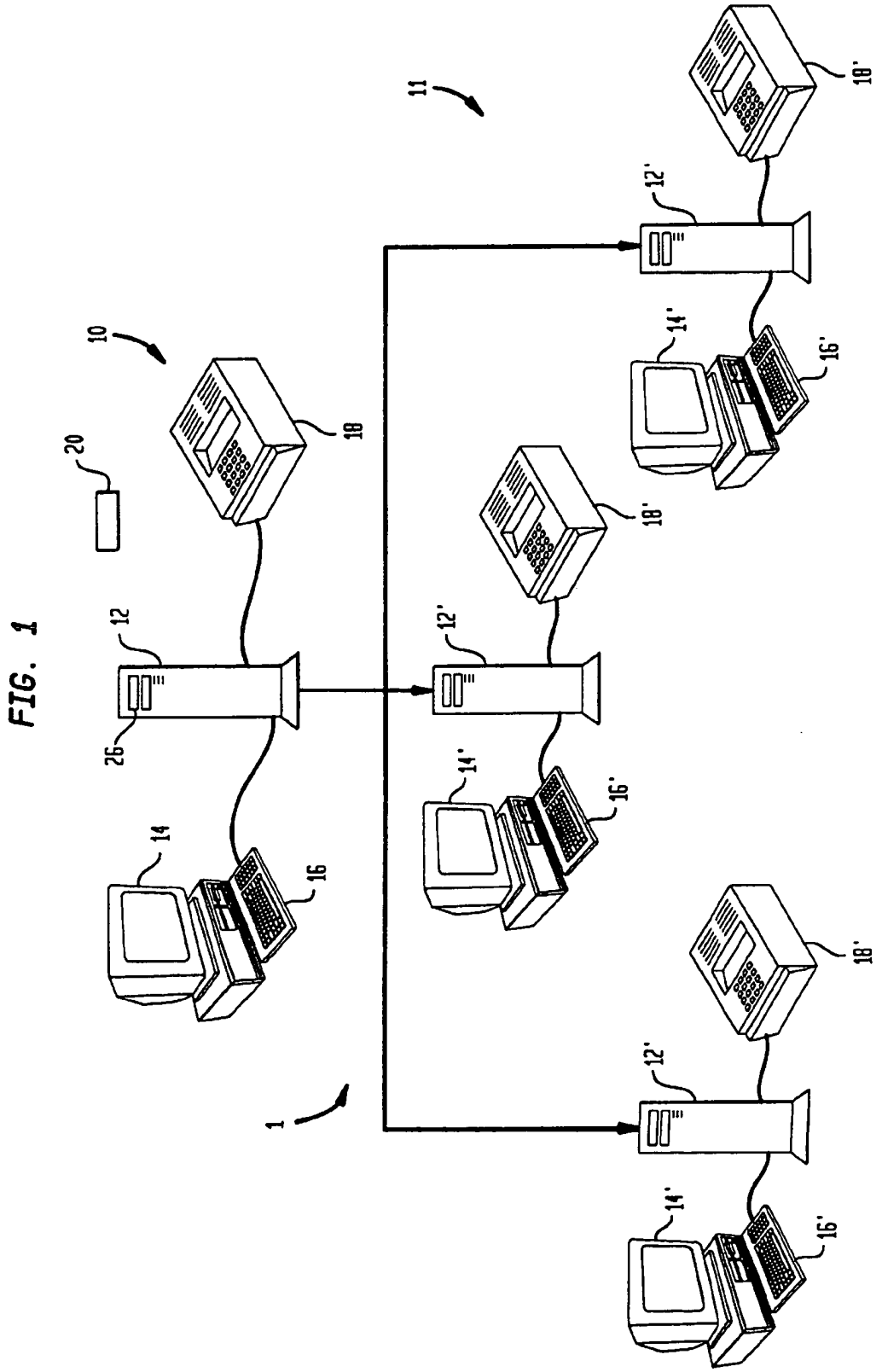


FIG. 1

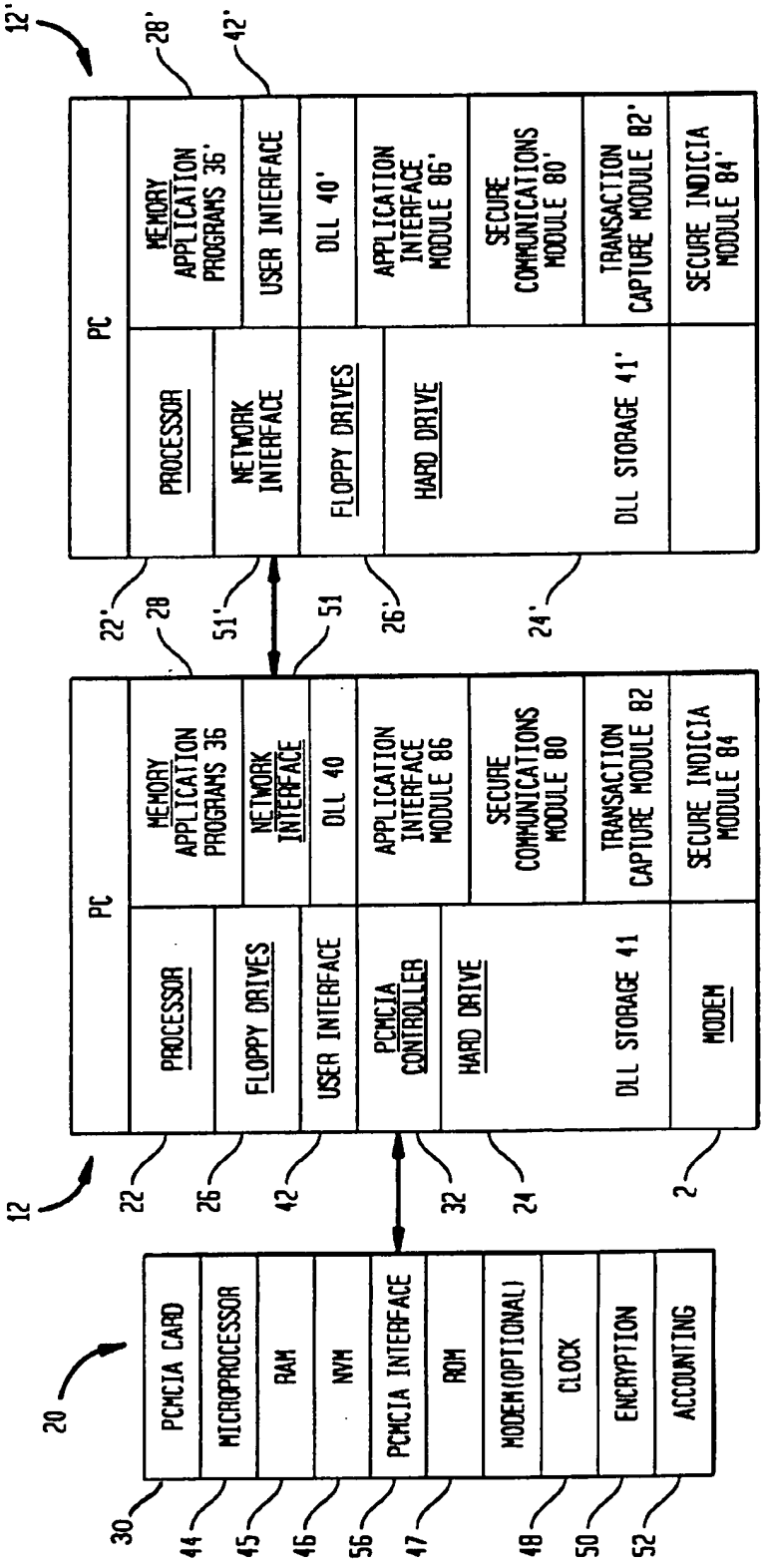

PC
MEMORY APPLICATION PROGRAMS 36'
USER INTERFACE
DLL 40'
APPLICATION INTERFACE MODULE 86'
SECURE COMMUNICATIONS MODULE 80'
TRANSACTION CAPTURE MODULE 82'
SECURE INDICIA MODULE 84'
PROCESSOR
NETWORK INTERFACE
FLOPPY DRIVES
HARD DRIVE
DLL STORAGE 41'
12'
28'
42'
22'
28
51'
51
26'
24'
PC
MEMORY APPLICATION PROGRAMS 36
NETWORK INTERFACE
DLL 40
APPLICATION INTERFACE MODULE 86
SECURE COMMUNICATIONS MODULE 80
TRANSACTION CAPTURE MODULE 82
SECURE INDICIA MODULE 84
PROCESSOR
FLOPPY DRIVES
USER INTERFACE
PCMCIA CONTROLLER
HARD DRIVE
DLL STORAGE 41
MODEM
12
22
26
42
32
24
2
20
PCMCIA CARD
MICROPROCESSOR
RAM
NVM
PCMCIA INTERFACE
ROM
MODEM(OPTIONAL)
CLOCK
ENCRYPTION
ACCOUNTING
30
44
45
46
56
47
48
50
52

FIG. 2

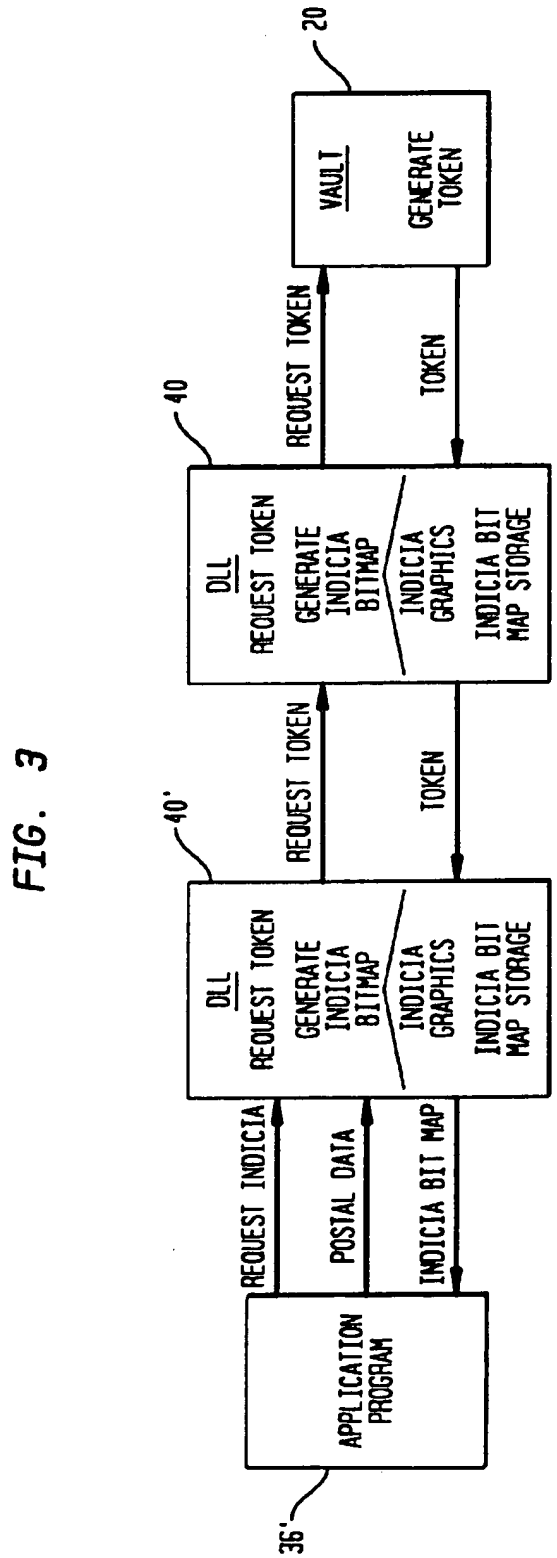

20
VAULT
GENERATE TOKEN
REQUEST TOKEN
TOKEN
40
DLL
REQUEST TOKEN
GENERATE INDICIA BITMAP
INDICIA GRAPHICS
INDICIA BIT MAP STORAGE
REQUEST TOKEN
TOKEN
40'
DLL
REQUEST TOKEN
GENERATE INDICIA BITMAP
INDICIA GRAPHICS
INDICIA BIT MAP STORAGE
REQUEST INDICIA
POSTAL DATA
INDICIA BIT MAP
APPLICATION PROGRAM
36'

FIG. 3

FIG. 4A

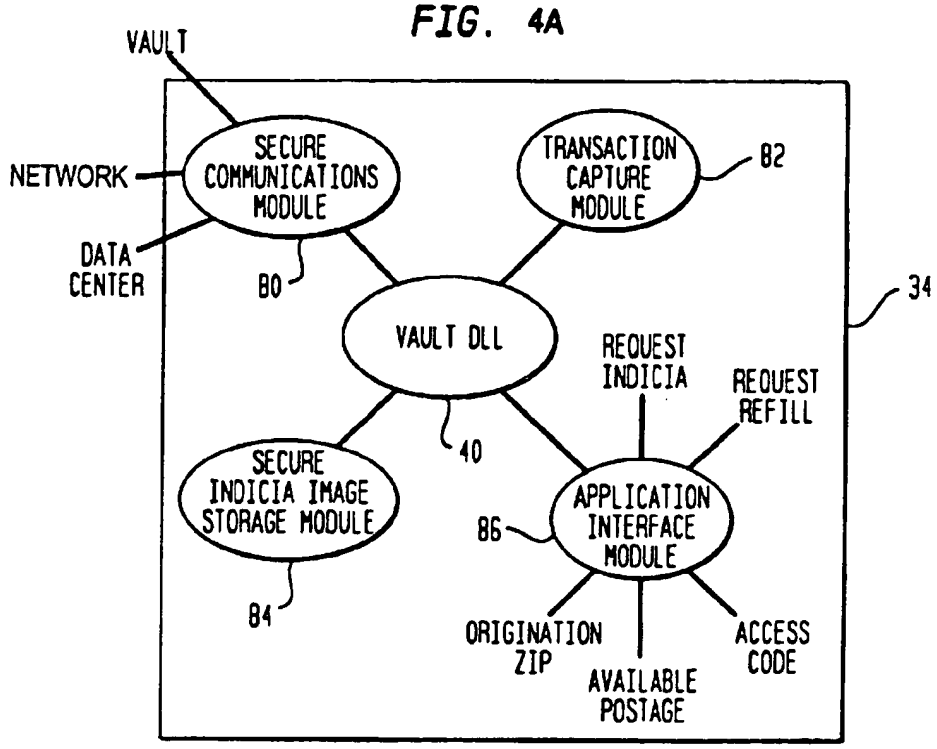

VAULT
NETWORK
SECURE COMMUNICATIONS MODULE
DATA CENTER
80
TRANSACTION CAPTURE MODULE
82
34
VAULT DLL
40
REQUEST INDICIA
REQUEST REFILL
SECURE INDICIA IMAGE STORAGE MODULE
84
APPLICATION INTERFACE MODULE
86
ORIGINATION ZIP
AVAILABLE POSTAGE
ACCESS CODE

FIG. 4B

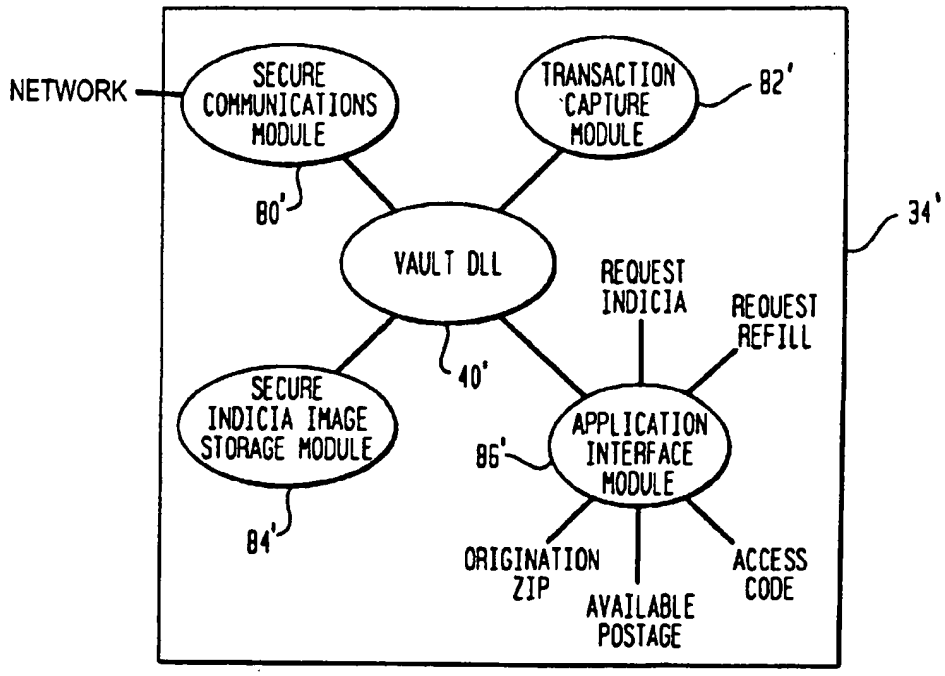

NETWORK
SECURE COMMUNICATIONS MODULE
80'
TRANSACTION CAPTURE MODULE
82'
34'
VAULT DLL
40'
REQUEST INDICIA
REQUEST REFILL
SECURE INDICIA IMAGE STORAGE MODULE
84'
APPLICATION INTERFACE MODULE
86'
ORIGINATION ZIP
AVAILABLE POSTAGE
ACCESS CODE

FIG. 5

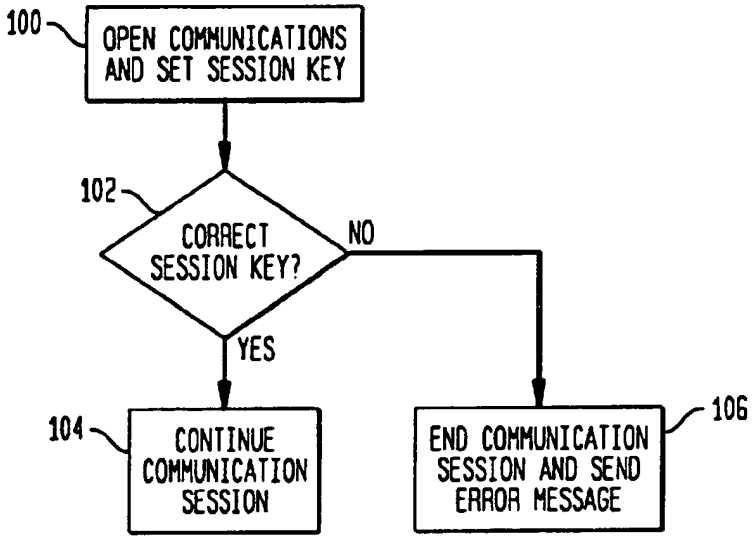

100
OPEN COMMUNICATIONS AND SET SESSION KEY
102
CORRECT SESSION KEY?
NO
YES
104
CONTINUE COMMUNICATION SESSION
END COMMUNICATION SESSION AND SEND ERROR MESSAGE
106

FIG. 6

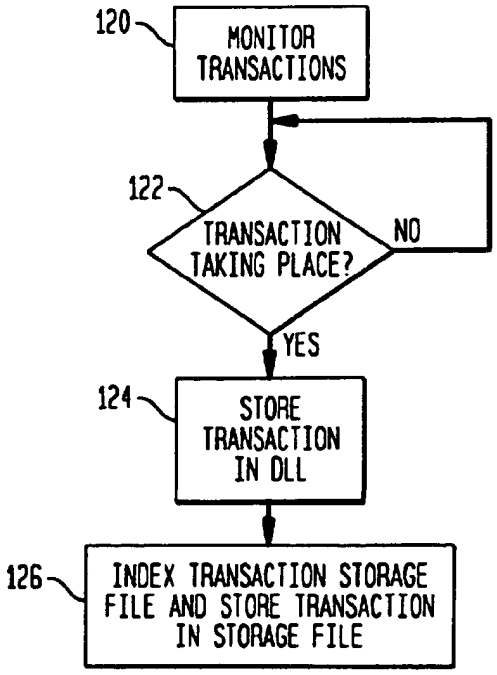

120
MONITOR TRANSACTIONS
122
TRANSACTION TAKING PLACE?
NO
YES
124
STORE TRANSACTION IN DLL
126
INDEX TRANSACTION STORAGE FILE AND STORE TRANSACTION IN STORAGE FILE

FIG. 7

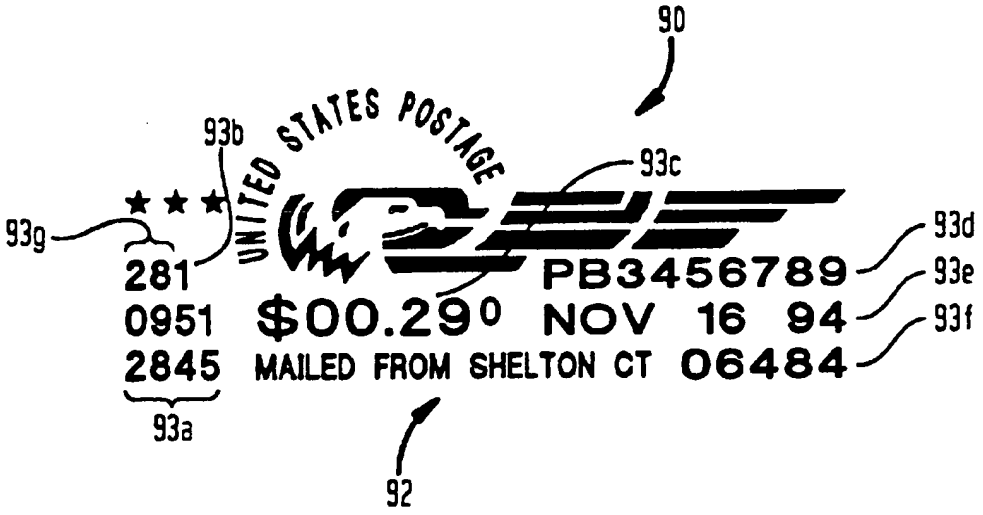

90
93b
UNITED STATES POSTAGE
93c
93g
★ ★ ★
281
PB3456789
93d
93e
0951 $00.290 NOV 16 94
93f
2845 MAILED FROM SHELTON CT 06484
93a
92

FIG. 8

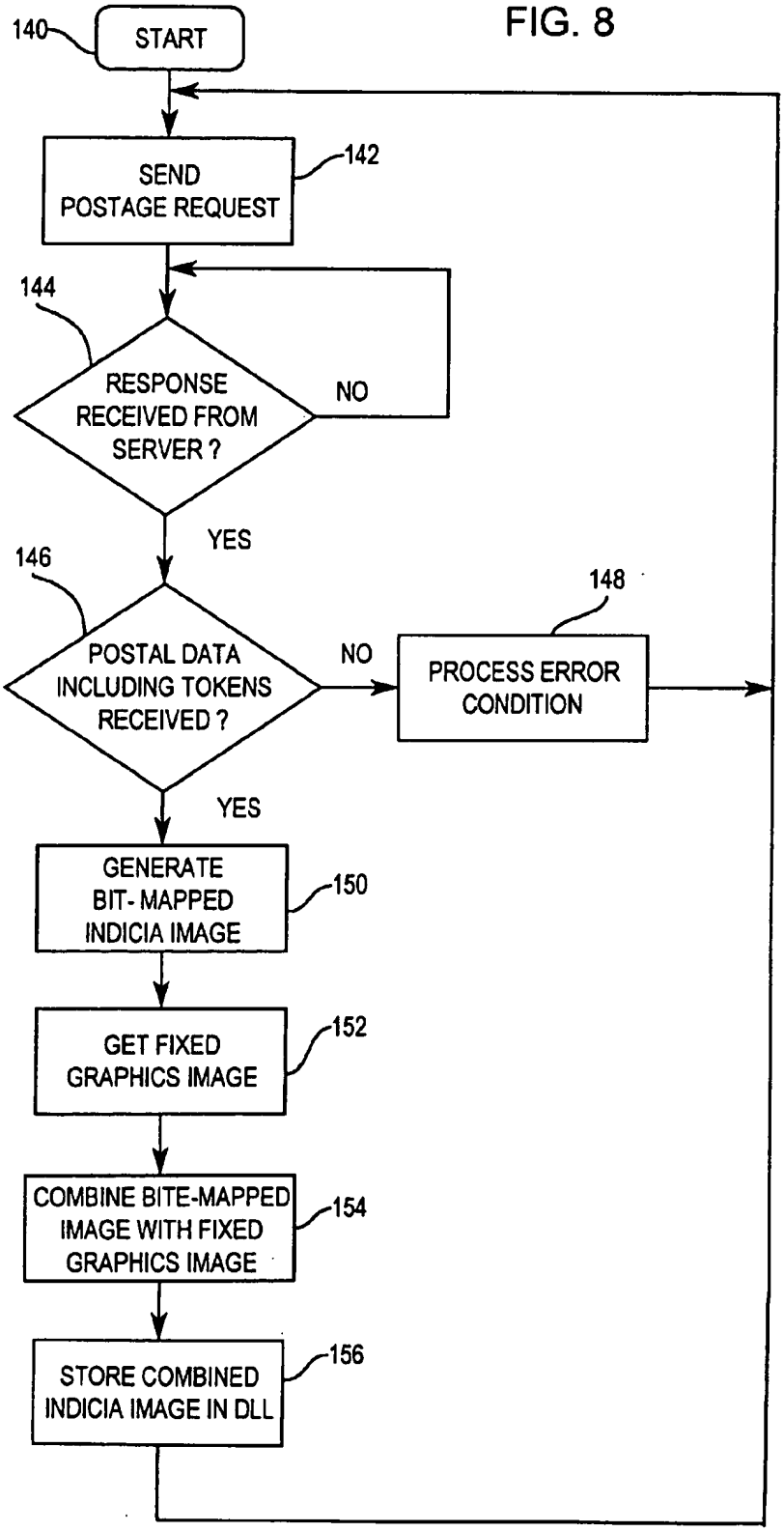
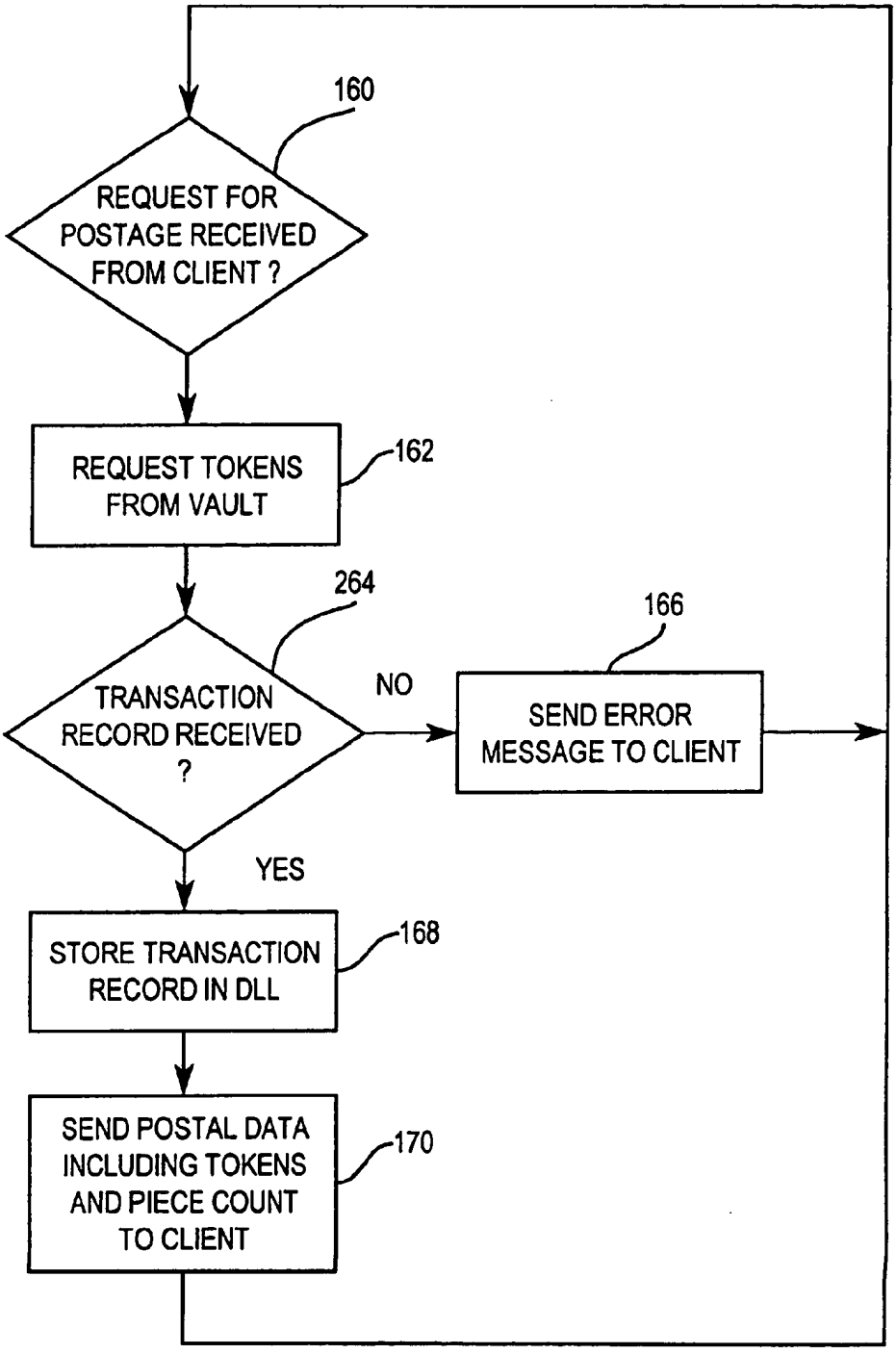

140
START
SEND POSTAGE REQUEST
142
144
RESPONSE RECEIVED FROM SERVER ?
NO
YES
146
POSTAL DATA INCLUDING TOKENS RECEIVED ?
NO
148
PROCESS ERROR CONDITION
YES
GENERATE BIT- MAPPED INDICIA IMAGE
150
GET FIXED GRAPHICS IMAGE
152
COMBINE BITE-MAPPED IMAGE WITH FIXED GRAPHICS IMAGE
154
STORE COMBINED INDICIA IMAGE IN DLL
156

FIG. 9


160
REQUEST FOR POSTAGE RECEIVED FROM CLIENT ?
REQUEST TOKENS FROM VAULT
162
264
TRANSACTION RECORD RECEIVED ?
NO
166
SEND ERROR MESSAGE TO CLIENT
YES
STORE TRANSACTION RECORD IN DLL
168
SEND POSTAL DATA INCLUDING TOKENS AND PIECE COUNT TO CLIENT
170

NETWORK OPEN METERING SYSTEM

RELATED APPLICATIONS

The present application is related to the following U.S. patent applications Ser. Nos. 08/575,106, now U.S. Pat. No. 5,625,694 issued on Apr. 29, 1997, 08/575,107; now U.S. Pat. No. 5,781,438 issued on Jul. 14, 1998; 08/574,746; now U.S. Pat. No. 5,835,604 issued on Nov. 10, 1998; 08/574,745; now U.S. Pat. No. 5,742,683 issued on Apr. 21, 1998; 08/575,110; 08/574,743; now U.S. Pat. No. 5,793,867 issued on Aug. 11, 1998; 08/575,112; 08/575,104; now U.S. Pat. No. 5,835,689 issued on Nov. 10, 1998; 08/574,749; now U.S. Pat. No. 5,590,198 issued on Dec. 31, 1996, and 08/575,111 now abandoned, each filed concurrently herewith, and assigned to the assignee of the present invention.

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

The present invention relates generally to value printing systems and, more particularly, to value printing systems wherein a printer is not dedicated to a metering module.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

Postage metering systems are being developed which employ digital printers to print encrypted information on a mailpiece. Such metering systems are presently categorized by the USPS as either closed systems or open systems. In a closed system, the system functionality is solely dedicated to metering activity. A closed system metering device includes a dedicated printer securely coupled to a metering or accounting function. In a closed system, since the printer is securely coupled and dedicated to the meter, printing cannot take place without accounting. In an open metering system the system functionality is not dedicated solely to metering activity. An open system metering device includes a printer that is not dedicated to the metering activity, thus freeing system functionality for multiple and diverse uses in addition to the metering activity. An open system metering device is a postage evidencing device (PED) with a non-dedicated printer that is not securely coupled to a secure accounting module.

Typically, the postage value for a mailpiece is encrypted together with other data to generate a digital token which is then used to generate postage indicia that is printed on the mailpiece. A digital token is encrypted information that authenticates the information imprinted on a mailpiece including postal value. Examples of systems for generating and using digital tokens are described in U.S. Pat. No. 4,757,537, 4,831,555, 4,775,246, 4,873,645 and 4,725,718, the entire disclosures of which are hereby incorporated by reference. These systems employ an encryption algorithm to encrypt selected information to generate at least one digital token for each mailpiece. The encryption of the information provides security to prevent altering of the printed information in a manner such that any misuse of the tokens is detectable by appropriate verification procedures.

Typical information which may be encrypted as part of a digital token includes origination postal code, vendor identification, data identifying the PED, piece count, postage amount, date, and, for an open system, destination postal code. These items of information, collectively referred to as Postal Data, when encrypted with a secret key and printed on a mail piece provide a very high level of security which enables the detection of any attempted modification of a postal revenue block or a destination postal code. A postal revenue block is an image printed on a mail piece that includes the digital token used to provide evidence of postage payment. The Postal Data may be printed both in encrypted and unencrypted form in the postal revenue block. Postal Data serves as an input to a Digital Token Transformation which is a cryptographic transformation computation that utilizes a secret key to produce digital tokens. Results of the Digital Token Transformation, i.e., digital tokens, are available only after completion of the Accounting Process.

Digital tokens are utilized in both open and closed metering systems. However, for open metering systems, the non-dedicated printer may be used to print other information in addition to the postal revenue block and may be used in activity other than postage evidencing. In an open system PED, addressee information is included in the Postal Data which is used in the generation of the digital tokens. Such use of the addressee information creates a secure link between the mailpiece and the postal revenue block and allows unambiguous authentication of the mail piece.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

In accordance with the present invention an network-based open metering system is provided wherein some of the functionality typically performed in the vault of a conventional postage meter has been removed from the vault of the network-based open metering system and is performed in server and client PCs in the network. It has been discovered that this transfer of functionality from the vault to the PCs does not effect the security of the meter because the security of the network-based open metering system is in the information being processed.

Thus, the present invention provides a network-based open metering system that comprises a conventional network of a server PC and a plurality of client PC's, special Windows-based software in the server PC and each of client PC's, and a plug-in peripheral as a vault to store postage funds. The network-based meter uses the client PC's and their non-secure and nondedicated printers to print postage on envelopes and labels at the same time it prints a recipient address. The present invention provides access to an metering system by multiple users that are geographically separated, for example at different offices within a building.

The present invention provides a network-based open meter system, which consists of a personal computer (PC) network, a digital printer operatively connected to each PC in the network, a removable electronic vault operatively connected to the server PC, an optional modem for funds recharge (debit or credit), PC software modules in the form of a Dynamic Link Library (DLL) and a user interface module in each PC. The vault is a secure encryption device for digital token generation, funds management and traditional accounting functions. The DLL module in the client initiates all communications with the DLL in the server PC which communicates with the vault, and provides an open interface to Windows-based applications. Secure communication between the client PC and the vault is desired but is not necessary for system security. The DLL module in the server PC obtains from the vault transaction records comprising digital tokens issued by the vault and associated postal data and sends the transaction record to the client PC which then generates an electronic indicia image. The usage of postal funds and the transaction record are stored in the vault. Another copy of the usage of postal funds and the transaction record may be stored on the server and client hard drives as backup. The user interface module obtains the electronic indicia image from the DLL module for printing

the postal revenue block on a document, such as an envelope. The user interface also communicates with the vault via the DLL in the server PC for remote refills and for performing administrative functions.

The present invention further provides open system network metering that includes security to prevent tampering and false evidence of postage payment as well 4as the ability to do batch processing of envelopes, review of indicia and addressing on envelope before printing.

DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

The above and other objects and advantages of the present invention will be apparent upon consideration of the following detailed description, taken in conjunction with accompanying drawings, in which like reference characters refer to like parts throughout, and in which:

FIG. **1** is a block diagram of a PC-Network metering system in accordance with the present invention;

FIG. **2** is a schematic block diagram of the PC-Network metering system of FIG. 1 including a removable vault card in a server PC and a DLL in each of the PC's;

FIG. **3** is a schematic block diagram of the client and server PC's in the PC-Network metering system of FIG. **1** including interaction with the vault to generate indicia bitmap;

FIG. **4**. (4A–4B)' is a block diagram of the DLL sub-modules in the PC-Network metering system of FIG. **1**;

FIG. **5** is a flow chart of the Secure Communications sub-module in the PC-Network metering system of FIG. **1**;

FIG. **6** is a flow chart of the Transaction Capture sub-module in the PC-Network metering system of FIG. **1**;

FIG. **7** is an representation of indicia printed by the PC-Network metering system of FIG. **1**;

FIG. **8** is a flow chart of the client requesting an indicia in the PC-Network metering system of FIG. **1**; and

FIG. **9** is a flow diagram of the server responding to a request for an indicia in the PC-Network metering system of FIG. **1**.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE PRESENT INVENTION

In describing the present invention, reference is made to the drawings, wherein there is seen in FIGS. **1–3** an open system network-based postage meter, also referred to herein as a network-based metering system, generally referred to as **1**, comprising a server **10** and a plurality of clients **11**. Server **10** is configured to operate as a host to a removable metering device or electronic vault, generally referred to as **20**, in which postage funds are stored.

In the following description and in the drawings, components common to server **10** and clients **11** are distinguished, when necessary, by referring to the client components with a prime designation. When the component functionality is common to both server and client PC's the description does not distinguish between server and client.

The server **10** and clients **11** include the following common components: a personal computer (PC) **12**, a display **14**, a keyboard **16**, and an unsecured digital printer **18**, preferably a laser or ink-jet printer. Each PC **12** includes a conventional processor **22**, such as the 80486 and Pentium processors manufactured by Intel, and conventional hard drive **24**, floppy drive(s) **26**, and memory **28**. Server **10** includes an electronic vault **20**, which is housed in a removable card, such as PCMCIA card **30**. Electronic vault **20** is a secure encryption device for postage funds management, digital token generation and traditional accounting functions. Server **10** may also include an optional modem **29** which is located in PC **12**, preferably, or in card **30**. Modem **29** may be used for communicating with a Postal Service or a postal authenticating vendor for recharging funds (debit or credit). A description of such communication by modem is described in U.S. Pat. No. 4,831,555, incorporated herein by reference. In an alternate embodiment the modem may be located in PCMCIA card **30**.

Each of the PC's **12** includes a Windows-based PC software module **34** (FIGS. **3** and **4**) that is accessible from conventional Windows-based word processing, database and spreadsheet application programs **36**. PC software module **34** includes a dynamic link library (DLL) **40**, a user interface module **42** (FIG. **2**), and a plurality of sub-modules that control the metering functions. In server **10**, DLL module **40** securely communicates with vault **20** and clients **11**. In client **11**, DLL module **40'** securely communicates with server **10**. DLL **40**, in server **10** and client **11**, provides an open interface to Microsoft Windows-based application programs **36** through user interface module **42**. DLL module **40** also securely stores transaction records reflecting the usage of postal funds of vault **20**. User interface module **42** provides application programs **36** access to an electronic indicia image from DLL module **40** for printing the postal revenue block on a document, such as an envelope or label. User interface module **42** also provides application programs the capability to initiate remote refills and to perform administrative functions.

Thus, network-based metering system **1** operates as a conventional network, except that a client or network printer prints postage upon user request. Printers **18** print all documents normally printed by a personal computer, including printing letters and addressing envelopes, and in accordance with the present invention, prints postage indicia. Network-based meter system **1** uses server **10** to issue postage and one of the printers to print the issued postage on envelopes at the same time it prints a recipient's address or to print labels for pre-addressed return envelopes or large mailpieces. It will be understood that although the preferred embodiment of the present invention is described as a postage metering system, the present invention is applicable to any value metering system that includes transaction evidencing. It will also be understood that the present invention could also be used in a network in which a network printer, such as the server printer, is used to print envelopes with indicia, when local printers are not available to some or all of the client PC's.

A description of the key components of network-based metering system **1** are described below followed by a description of the preferred operation of network-based metering system **1**.

The Vault

In the preferred embodiment of the present invention, the vault is housed in a PCMCIA I/O device, or card, which is accessed through a PCMCIA controller **32** in server **10**. A PCMCIA card is a credit card size peripheral or adapter that conforms to the standard specification of the personal Computer Memory Card International Association.

Referring now to FIGS. **2** and **3**, the PCMCIA card includes a microprocessor **44**, non-volatile memory (NVM) **46**, clock **48**, an encryption module **50** and an accounting module **52**. The encryption module **50** may implement the NBS Data Encryption Standard (DES) or another suitable

encryption scheme. In the preferred embodiment, encryption module **50** is a software module. It will be understood that encryption module **50** could also be a separate device, such as a separate chip connected to microprocessor **44**. Accounting module **52** may be EEPROM that incorporates ascending and descending registers as well as postal data, such as origination ZIP Code, vendor identification, data identifying server PC **12**, sequential piece count of the postal revenue block generated by the network-based metering system **1**, postage amount and the date of submission to the Postal Service. As is known, an ascending register in a metering unit records the amount of postage that has been dispensed, i.e., issued by the vault, in all transactions and the descending register records the value, i.e., amount of postage remaining in the vault, which value decreases as postage is issued.

The hardware design of the vault includes an interface **56** that communicates with the server host processor **22** through PCMCIA controller **32**. Preferably, for added physical security, the components of vault **20** that perform the encryption and store the encryption keys (microprocessor **44**, ROM **47** and NVM **46**) are packaged in the same integrated circuit device/chip that is manufactured to be tamper proof. Such packaging ensures that the contents of NVM **46** may be read only by the encryption processor and are not accessible outside of the integrated circuit device. Alternatively, the entire card could be manufactured to be tamper proof.

In accordance with the present invention, the open system vault **20** is strictly a slave device in PC **12** of server **10**. Server host processor **22** generates a command and vault **20** replies with a response. Vault **20** does not generate unsolicited messages. Thus, server PC **12** requests vault status whenever any transaction is initiated. A further description of vault **20** is disclosed in the related U.S. patent application Ser. No. 08/575,112, previously noted, which is incorporated herein in its entirety by reference. Dynamic Link Library Control of the Vault and Network Communications

In accordance with the present invention, the functionality of DLL's **40** and **40'** in server and client PC's, respectively, is a key component of network-based metering **1**. DLL **40** includes both executable code and data storage area **41** that is resident in hard drive **24** of PC **12**. In a Windows environment, a vast majority of applications programs **36**, such as word processing and spreadsheet programs, communicate with one another using one or more dynamic link libraries. The present invention encapsulates all the processes involved in metering, and provides an open interface to vault **20** from all Windows-based applications capable of using a dynamic link library. In accordance with the present invention, any client application program **36'** can communicate with vault microprocessor **44** in PCMCIA card through DLL **40'** and server PC **12**.

In accordance with the present invention, DLL **40** includes the following software sub-modules: secure communications **80**, transaction captures **82**, secure indicia image creation and storage **84**, and application interface module **86**.

Secure Communications

Since vault **20** is not physically secured to server PC **12**, it may be possible for that one vault **20** attached to server PC **12** is replaced with another vault **20** while a vault transaction is in process. The Secure Communications sub-module **80** prevents this from happening by maintaining secure communication between server DLL **40** and vault **20**. Secure Communications sub-module **80** in server **11** identifies a specific vault **20** when it opens a communication session through PCMCIA controller **32**, and maintains communication data integrity with the specific vault during the entire communication session. Similarly, when a communication session is initiated between client **11** and a server **10**, Secure Communications sub-module **80** maintains communication data integrity between the client **11** and server **10**. Refering now to FIG. **5**, when a communication session is initiated, between server DLL **40** and vault **20**, or between client **11** and server **10**, a session key is negotiated at step **100**. All the messages thereafter are encoded/decoded using the session key which is used for only the one particular communication session. Whenever the session key changes during the communication session, the communication session terminates and an error message is sent to the user at step **106**. The use of session keys is described in Applied Cryptography by Bruce Schneier, published by John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1994. Thus, the session key not only provides secure encrypted communication during a token request and issue, but also prevents another vault (PCMCIA card **30**) from replacing the vault **20** that began a communication session, because the other vault does not have the session key negotiated at the beginning of the communication session. The secure communications between server **10** and client **11** ensures that only the client requesting a token can receive the token. Secure Communications sub-module **80** in server **11** also controls secure communications with the postal data center, for example, during refills of the accounting registers in vault **20**.

Transaction Captures

Conventional postage meters store transactions in the meter. In accordance with the present invention, Transaction Capture sub-module **82** in server **10** captures each transaction record received from vault **20** and records the transaction record in DLL **40** and in DLL storage area **41** on hard drive **24**. When server **10** sends the transaction record to client **11**, Transaction Capture sub-module **82'** in client **11** captures the transaction record and records the transaction record in DLL **40'** and in DLL storage area **41'** on hard drive **24'**. Referring now to FIG. **6**, from the moment that a communication session is established, between server DLL **40** and vault **20**, or between client **11** and server **10**, respective Transaction Capture submodules **82** and **82'** monitor message traffic at step **120**, selectively capture each transaction record for token generations and refills, and store such transaction records in respective DLLs **40** and **40'** at step **124** and in an invisible and write-protected files **83** and **83'** in DLL storage areas **41** and **41'** at step **126**. The information stored for each transaction record includes, for example, vault serial number, date, piece count, postage, postal funds available (descending register), tokens, destination postal code and the block check character. A predetermined number of the most recent records initiated can be stored in this manner by indexing files **83** and **83'** accordingly. In the preferred embodiment files **83** and **83'** are indexed according to piece count but may searched according to addressee information. Server file **83** represents the mirror image of vault **20** at the time of the transaction except for the encryption keys and configuration parameters. Client file **83'** may represent a subset of the image of vault **20** at the time of the transaction because each client **11** stores transaction records of transactions initiated by such client. Storing transaction records on hard drive **24** provides backup capability which is described below.

A description of a digital token generation process is disclosed for a PC-meter system in the related U.S. Patent

Applications Serial Nos. [Attorney Dockets E-416, E-415 and E-419], which are incorporated herein in their entirety by reference. The digital token generation process for network-based metering system **1** is the same as described in the related applications except that a client application program **36'** sends a request for digital token to vault **20** through client DLL **40'** and server DLL **40** as shown in FIG. **3**. The generated token is sent to the client DLL **40'** through the server DLL **40** for use in generating an indicia. In the present invention, when a request for token is sent from a client to server **10**, all postal information that is needed to calculate the token as well as parameters identifying the client, such as user ID, password and client PC identification, must accompany the request since multiple clients may be requesting tokens simultaneously.

Indicia Image Creation and Storage

In a closed metering system, such as conventional postage meters, the indicia is secure because the indicia printer is dedicated to the meter activity and is physically secured to the accounting portion of the meter, typically in a tamper-proof manner. In an open metering system, such as the present invention, such physical security is not present.

In accordance with the present invention, the entire fixed graphics image **90** of the indicia **92**, shown in FIG. **7** is stored as compressed data **94** in DLL storage area **41**. Postal data information, including piece count **93***a*, vendor ID **93***b*, postage amount **93***c*, serial number **93***d*, date **93***e* and origination ZIP **93***f* and tokens **93***g* are combined with the fixed graphics image **90** by Indicia Image Creation and Storage sub-module **84**.

Referring now to FIGS. **3** and **8**, a request for indicia is made, at step **142**, from application program **36'** in client **11** to server **10**. At step **144**, Secure Communications sub-module **80'** in client **11** checks for a response from server **10**, When a response is received, Indicia Image Creation and Storage sub-module **84'** checks, at step **146**, the response for postal data, including at least one digital token. If the postal data has not been sent with the response, at step **148**, an error condition is processed that results in a message to the user. If the response from server **10** included the expected postal data, at step **150**, Indicia Image Creation and Storage sub-module **84'** generates a bit-mapped indicia image **96** by expanding the compressed fixed graphics image data **94**, at step **152**, and combining, at step **154**, the indicia's fixed graphics image **90** with some or all of the postal data information and tokens received from vault **20**. At step **156**, the indicia image is stored in DLL **40'** for printing. Sub-module **84'** sends to the requesting application program **36'** in client PC **12'** the created bit-mapped indicia image **96** that is ready for printing, and then stores a transaction record comprising the digital tokens and associated postal data in DLL storage area **41'**.

Thus, the bit-mapped indicia image **96** is stored in DLL **40'** which can only be accessed by executable code in DLL **40'**. Furthermore, only the executable code of DLL **40'** can access the fixed graphics image **90** of the indicia to generate bit-mapped indicia image **96**. This prevents accidental modification of the indicia because it would be very difficult for a normal user to access, intentionally or otherwise, the fixed graphics image **90** of the indicia and the bit-mapped indicia image **96**.

Referring now to FIGS. **3** and **9**, when the request for indicia is made, from application program **36'**, Secure Communications sub-module **80** in server **10** checks for the request from client **11**, at step **160**. When the request is received, Secure Communications sub-module **80** requests tokens from vault **20**, at step **162**. At step **164**, Secure Communications sub-module **80** checks for a transaction record, including digital token, from vault **20**. If a transaction record is not received in response to the request from server **10**, an error is processed, at step **166**, resulting in an error message to client **11**. If a transaction record is received, then, at step **168**, the transaction record is stored in DLL **40** and DLL storage area **41**. At step **170**, Secure Communications sub-module **80** sends the postal data received as in the transaction record, including token and piece count, to client **11**.

The request for indicia most likely will originate from a client **11** but could originate from server **10**. When server **10** originates a request for indicia server **10** functions as a PC-based meter as described U.S. patent application Ser. No. 08/575,112, previously noted, which is hereby incorporated in its entirety by reference.

Application Interface

The Application Interface sub-module **86**, in server **10** or client **11**, provides the following services when requested by an application program **36** in PC **12**. Application program **36** accepts user data through user interface module **42** and prints indicia on an envelope or on a label. In the preferred embodiment of the present invention, such application program **36** would be an off-the-shelf software module, such as a word processor or spreadsheet, that can access DLL **40**. In an alternate embodiment application program **36** could be a software module dedicated solely to accept user data and print indicia on an envelope or on a label. Application Interface sub-module **86** provides the destination ZIP data and associated postal data needed to create the indicia. Application Interface sub-module **86** requests available postage from vault **20** and reports the available postage to the requesting application program **36**.

When vault **20** is refilled with postage funds from the data center, Application Interface sub-module **86** requests from vault **20** the access code required for refills and reports the access code received to the Secure Communications sub-module **80** which initiates communications with the data center. Application Interface sub-module **86** initiates the refill and provides the amount and combination to vault **20**. DLL **40** reports the result to the requesting application program **36** which acknowledges the refill to the user.

Application Interface sub-module **86** processes a request for indicia received from application program **36** and forwards the request to Indicia Image Creation and Storage sub-module **84**. Application Interface sub-module **86** provides postal data, including date, postage, and a destination postal code, such as an 11 digit ZIP code, to Indicia Image Creation and Storage sub-module **84** which then generates a bit-mapped indicia image **96**. Application Interface sub-module **86** reports to application program **36** that the bit-mapped indicia image **96** is ready for printing.

Backup On Hard Drive

Vault **20** must be a secure device because it contains the accounting information of the amount of postage remaining in the vault and the postage printed. However, the very nature of the security makes it hard to recover postal funds in the event a malfunction occurs and the vault cannot be accessed by normal operation. The present invention enhances the reliability of a PC meter system by using the hard disks of server **10** and clients **11** to backup the accounting information of the vault. As previously described, the

transaction capture sub-modules **82** and **82'** store transaction files as backup files on hard drives **24** and **24'**. This provides a benefit that certain functions, such as account reconciliation, can be performed even when vault **20** malfunctions. Such backup is unavailable in conventional postage meters.

For further security, the backup transaction files can be encrypted before being stored on hard drives **24** and **24'** to prevent tampering. The number of transactions that are maintained on hard drives **24** and **24'** is limited only by the available storage space on the hard drives. Preferably, at least all transactions since the last refill would be maintained on server **10** as backup.

A detailed description of recovery from vault malfunction is disclosed in co-pending U.S. patent application Ser. No. 08/574,743, previously noted, which is incorporated herein in its entirety by reference.

Operation of the PC Meter

Generally, the first action by a user after powering up a conventional meter is setting the time and date of the meter. Setting the date is necessary to generate derived keys which are used to generate the digital tokens. (Some recent meters have a real time clock internal to the meter in which case the time and date need only be set once.) The present invention spares the user from having to set the vault date.

As previously described, vault **20** does not have an independent power source and therefore cannot have a continuous running real-time clock. The date must be set every time the vault is powered-up. Power is applied to vault **20** only when it is plugged into server PC **12**. Thus, the date would normally be entered by the user through server PC **12** each time vault **20** is plugged into PCMCIA controller **32**. Since server PC **12** has a real-time clock, the date setting process may be automated and made transparent to the user. In accordance with the present invention, the time and date set in server PC **12** is sent to vault **20** each time power is initially applied to vault **20**. The vault date is used by DLLs **40** and **40'** to generate the indicia. The vault date may be changed at any time by the user to facilitate post-dating of mail.

Upon application of power to vault **20** by PCMCIA controller **32**, the date of server PC **12** is obtained through user interface **42**. The date is then translated into the correct format and sent to vault **20** which then sets its date, calculates its date dependent token keys and returns its status and the token keys to server PC **12**. Additionally, a default postage amount (e.g. First Class Postage) may be set in a similar manner. This method enables network-based metering system **1** immediately when vault **20** is plugged into PCMCIA controller **32** without the user having to manually set parameters. The user may change the vault date (in order to post date mail) or the default postage amount at any time.

In an alternate embodiment, PCMCIA card has its own internal clock that is automatically set with the time and date in server PC **12** each time PCMCIA card is inserted into PCMCIA controller **32**.

In the preferred operation, a user of an application program **36** (running in either client **11** or server **10**), such as a word processor, highlights a recipient address from a letter or mailing list displayed on display **14**. The user requests the printing of an envelope with indicia. A dialog box appears on display **14** indicating the default postage amount which the user may accept or modify. When the postage amount is accepted, the entire envelope is previewed with all addressing, bar-coding and indicia shown on the envelope. At this point the user can print the envelope as shown or correct any errors that are seen in the preview.

As previously described, in network-based metering system **1** the printers are not dedicated to the metering function and the indicia are stored in PC **12** before printing. Thus, tokens can be generated individually or for a batch of addressees stored in the requesting client **11** which can later generate indicia from each of the tokens and then print the indicia at the user's discretion. Such delayed printing and batch processing is described in more detail in co-pending U.S. patent application Ser. No. 08/575,104, previously noted, which is incorporated herein in its entirety by reference.

As with any document prepared in a Windows-based PC system, a user may observe, through the application program **36** in which an envelope was created, an image of a fully prepared envelope or batch of envelopes to be printed, including addressee information and indicia, before printing any of the envelopes. Network-based metering system **1** also provides a user with the ability to customize return addresses, slogans, logos and greetings that are to be printed with the indicia on the envelope.

In an alternate embodiment of network-based metering system **1**, the electronic vault is in an IC token, such as manufactured by CDSM of Phoenix, Ariz., that is inserted into a token receptacle of a PCMCIA card and programmed to operate as the vault in a similar manner as described for PCMCIA card **30**. In another alternate embodiment, the electronic vault is in a smart diskette, such as manufactured by SmartDisc Security Corp. of Naples, Florida, that is programmed to operate in a similar manner as described for PCMCIA card **30**. In another alternate embodiment of network-based metering system **1**, the electronic vault is a tamper proof, hardware peripheral, such as a dongle, that is attached to a serial, parallel or SCSI port of the PC.

As used herein, the term personal computer is used generically and refers to present and future microprocessing systems with at least one processor operatively coupled to user interface means, such as a display and keyboard, and storage media. The personal computer may be a workstation that is accessible by more than one user.

While the present invention has been disclosed and described with reference to a single embodiment thereof, it will be apparent, as noted above that variations and modifications may be made therein. It is, thus, intended in the following claims to cover each variation and modification that falls within the true spirit and scope of the present invention.

What is claimed is:

1. A transaction evidencing system including a plurality of computer systems operatively configured to form a network with one of the computer systems functioning as a server and the remaining computer systems functioning as clients, each of the computer systems including processor, memory, storage and user interface means, at least some of said storage means including a plurality of non-metering application programs that are selectively run on said client computer systems, at least one of said computer systems including an unsecured printer operatively coupled thereto for printing in accordance with said non-metering application programs, the system comprising:

a portable vault card that is removably coupled to said server computer system, said vault card including digital token generation means and transaction accounting means, said server computer system including means for removably coupling said vault card to said PC;

vault interface means for effecting communications between said portable vault means and said non-metering application program and for performing metering functions other than metering functions performed in said portable vault means, said vault interface means comprising:

an application interface module in said client computer systems for interfacing with said non-metering application program;

a communications module in said server computer system for communicating with said portable vault means;

an indicia image creation and storage module in said client computer systems for generating indicia bitmaps and storing said indicia bitmaps in said storage means; and

a transaction capture module for storing storage means transaction records generated in said portable vault means.

2. The transaction evidencing system of claim **1** wherein said application interface module issues a request for at least one digital token in response to a request for indicia from said non-metering application program, said request for digital token including predetermined information required by said token generation means, said communications module sends said request for digital token and said predetermined information to said portable vault means and receives from said portable vault means a transaction record including a digital token generated by said token generation means, said indicia image creation and storage module generates an indicia bitmap from said digital token and stores said indicia bit map, said transaction capture module stores said transaction record said application interface module provides said indicia bitmap to said non-metering application program.

3. The transaction evidencing system of claim **2** wherein said transaction capture module in said server and client computer systems.

4. The transaction evidencing system of claim **2** wherein said indicia bitmap generating means generates a postage indicia bitmap by combining indicia graphics stored in said storage means of said requesting client computer system with said digital token and said predetermined information.

5. The transaction evidencing system of claim **2**, wherein a batch of digital tokens may be generated in the vault card and stored in a requesting one of said client computer systems before any indicia bitmaps corresponding to said batch of digital tokens are generated.

6. The transaction evidencing system of claim **2**, wherein said transaction record is encrypted before being stored in said storage means of said server computer system.

7. The transaction evidencing system of claim **2**, wherein said vault interface means provides said indicia bitmap to said one of said non-metering application programs for viewing an image of said indicia bitmap on a display coupled to said requesting client computer system before printing said indicia bitmap.

8. The transaction evidencing system of claim **1**, wherein a plurality of consecutive ones of said transaction records are stored in said storage means of said server computer system as backup to information stored in said vault card.

9. The transaction evidencing system of claim **1** wherein said transaction capture module in said server computer system.

10. The transaction evidencing system of claim **1**, wherein said vault interface means are part of dynamic link library modules in said computer systems.

11. The transaction evidencing system of claim **1**, wherein said vault card is a PCMCIA card.

12. A method of implementing a transaction evidencing system on a computer network comprising a plurality of computer systems operatively configured to form the computer network with one of the computer systems functioning as a server and the remaining computer systems functioning as clients, the method comprising the steps of:

providing a portable vault that is operatively coupled to the server, said vault operating as a secure accounting module of the transaction evidencing system;

requesting indicia in one of the clients for a particular document being processed in a non-metering application program running in the requesting client;

sending the request for indicia from the requesting client to the server with a predetermined set of information relating to the particular document;

sending, in response to said request for indicia, a request for at least one digital token from the server to the portable vault with the predetermined set of information;

issuing in said portable vault at least one digital token and sending the digital token as part of a transaction record to the server;

storing the transaction record in the server;

sending from the server to the requesting client the transaction record;

storing the transaction record in the client;

generating an indicia bitmap using the digital token and the predetermined set of information in the client; and

providing the indicia bitmap to the non-metering application program when the non-metering application program is ready to print the indicia.

13. The method of claim **12**, comprising the further steps of:

selecting in the non-metering application program recipient address information for use in the application program;

selecting in the non-metering application program an amount of postage to be printed on in the application program;

including the recipient address information and the amount of postage as part of the predetermined set of information; and

printing said recipient address and said indicia on an envelope.

14. The method of claim **12**, comprising the further step of:

storing a plurality of transaction records in a file on a hard drive of the server, and indexing the transaction records according to piece count.

15. The method of claim **12**, comprising the further step of:

viewing on a display coupled to the requesting client computer system an image of at least a part of the particular document with the indicia shown thereon before printing the particular document.

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